World Chronicle

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Special Initiative on Africa

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AFRICA

The United Nations System-wide Special Initiative on Africa is a set of concrete and coordinated actions to maximize support for development in Africa. Launched in March 1996, the UN Special Initiative on Africa brought together all executives heads of the United Nations specialized agencies and organizations, including the Bretton Woods institutions, to pledge their commitment to Africa, a renewal of hope and optimism. Four years later, has the UN Special Initiative on Africa been able to achieve any significant change for the long suffering African population? In this edition of **World Chronicle,** Dr. A. Babatunde Thomas, Coordinator of the UN Special Initiative on Africa discusses the challenges of development in Africa.

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ANNOUNCER: From United Nations Headquarters in New York, this is **World Chronicle**, an unedited interview programme about major global issues.

Here now to introduce our guest is the host of today's **World Chronicle**.

LITTLEJOHNS: I'm Michael Littlejohns, and this is **World Chronicle**.

The failure to alleviate poverty in Africa has been one of the international community's greatest shortcomings. The United Nations system-wide Special Initiative on Africa was designed to rationalize UN assistance to Africa through more effective coordination, capacity building and by facilitating genuine partnerships. But despite some encouraging results, poverty in Africa is still pervasive. The spread of HIV/AIDS, displacement from civil war, disruption of livelihoods, prolongation of human suffering and scarce resources for development, all contribute to the intractability of poverty. Is there hope that the new century will bring progress to the long-suffering population of Africa?

Our guest today is the Coordinator of the United Nations system-wide Special Initiative on Africa, Dr. A. Babatunde Thomas. Joining me to talk with Dr. Thomas are Jerome Hulé of the *News Agency of Nigeria* and John Metzler of *USA Radio Network*.

Dr. Thomas, welcome to **World Chronicle.**

THOMAS: Thank you very much.

LITTLEJOHNS: Dr. Thomas, the problem of poverty in Africa I suppose when you get down to it, is very largely one of education or lack thereof is it not? Is the UN Initiative that you're heading up giving special priority to the needs of the African people in terms of education?

THOMAS: Certainly, Michael. In fact the education cluster of this Initiative is really the flagship of the entire programme. The cluster on education which is being coordinated by the World Bank and UNESCO with about half a dozen other agencies working, collaborating together, has been able to set a strategy for themselves trying to see what can be done to reverse the challenges facing African countries, particularly with respect to the downward trend in enrolment in elementary schools. As a result of that, they have identified basic education as the target of the group's programme in Africa and in doing so they have identified 16 countries that have low enrolment and also low female literacy. And the programme is now in place to try and see what can be done to assist these countries, put in a place a national programme that they own themselves and that they lead themselves in making sure that they improve on the education sector.

LITTLEJOHNS: Has this programme been in existence long enough for you to be able to say whether its showing signs of success?

THOMAS: Yes, it has been in existence for quite some time. As you know, the Initiative itself was launched by the Secretary-General and Executive Heads of UN agencies with a number of Africa heads of states in 1996. Although it had teething problem in the beginning, in the last two years, yes, it has begun to show progress because through this Initiative we have been able to bring together agencies that have investment resources together with agencies that have good programmes so as to make sure that we marry the two together and the programmes get funded. And in the case of education I think that the results that we are beginning to see now in making sure that countries have programmes to try and improve on basic education, to try and address some of the policy challenges in the area of teacher salaries, for example, begin to bear some results. Yes, definitely.

LITTLEJOHNS: The United States is showing renewed interest in the problems of Africa and here at the United Nations Ambassador Richard Holbrooke, the United States' Permanent Representative, has made Africa something of a priority. There was the month of Africa during January when he was the President of the Security Council. Is the United States giving extra funding to your Initiative and is there a special fund in the World Bank or the International Monetary Fund which is directed towards these problems?

THOMAS: Well, there's no budgetary provision as such for this Initiative. The various agencies that are the coordinating entities are the ones that are responsible for mobilizing resources. But I can say that in the case of education, the World Bank and UNESCO have worked with other agencies that are cooperating with them on this particular cluster of activities to mobilize resources from bilateral donors. And one of those donors that have been funding the work in the area of education is the Norwegians. There is a Norwegian Trust Fund that has provided resources for the work that has been done so far on the education cluster. As far as the support of the United States is concerned, first of all I think we should commend Ambassador Holbrooke for the bold initiative he took to make Africa the centerpiece of his commitment during the month of January at the Security Council. We are getting funding from the United States through their contributions to UNDP which is funding the Secretariat.

LITTLEJOHNS: UN Development Programme?

THOMAS: Yes, the UN Development Programme, which is funding the Secretariat

for this Initiative.

HULE: Besides education Africa has problems in other areas . Besides education which other areas does this Initiative work in?

THOMAS: This Initiative has a total of 17 clusters, however we have decided for a start to focus on four of them. In addition to education we also have a lot of work going on in the health cluster and for us in Africa these two clusters actually constitute the major focus of the entire Initiative when it was launched. In terms of the budgetary provision that was anticipated at the time, these two clusters alone were to account for about 80 to 90 percent so that goes to show the importance that is given to these two clusters. In addition to these two, we also have one going on in the area of governance as well as information technology for development.

METZLER: Though the educational goals are appropriately ambitious don't you think there is also a back-to-basics, and I'm not speaking about reading and math but once again those health issues of clean water, sanitary conditions. Because if people are sick they're not going to be able to go to school properly, they're not going to be able to work. The undertow of poverty becomes a millstone. So I would imagine then you are addressing those goals in the health cluster?

THOMAS: Oh, most certainly. In addition to what is going on in the health cluster to try and deal with some of these challenges that may pose problems to what we are trying to do in the education cluster, there is also work going on in the water cluster. The water cluster is being led by UNEP, that is United Nations Environmental Programme which headquarters in Nairobi, with the World Bank, the World Meteorological Organization also. These are agencies that are helping to address all of these poverty-related issues that can impinge on whatever we are trying to do on education. As you very well say, if people are sick they can't go to school so all of these are being looked at in a rather holistic manner to make sure that we continue to make progress in this particular critical cluster on education.

HULE: How does this really Initiative work in relation to all these other UN agencies that are involved?

THOMAS: What is interesting about the Initiative is that for the first time UN agencies are working collaboratively together to make sure that there is coherence in the programme that they are delivering, to make sure that there is better coordination and to make sure that all those that have resources, as I indicated earlier, and those that have

programmes, have a common ground where they can bring all of their activities together and make sure that they deliver results on the ground. Where there are very specific initiatives by very specific agencies, what we have tried to do is to encourage those agencies to bring those initiatives also under the umbrella of this UN system-wide Special Initiative on Africa. Just to cite two examples: there is the United Nations Industrial Development Organization initiative on industrialization in Africa. It is now part of this Special Initiative. There is also another example of the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations on food security. That also has been brought within the framework of the Special Initiative. So we are trying very hard to make sure that we don't have a proliferation of initiatives. And where there are individual agencies' initiatives, they are brought together within this common framework so that we can reduce the transaction costs for our governments who would like very much to see us work together collaboratively and coordinate our activities better in the continent.

LITTLEJOHNS: Dr. Thomas, you have spoken about clusters, what does that mean exactly? What is a cluster?

THOMAS: Well, the clusters are made up of agencies and within the agencies we have a cluster leader or leaders. And in the case of education that we have been talking about here, we have the World Bank and UNESCO as the cluster leaders or the coordinating, if you please, agencies and within that cluster we have the United Nations Development Programme, we have the United Nations Population Fund and we have United Nations – you know, what everybody knows throughout the world as UNICEF. Everybody knows UNICEF. So these constitute the clusters within that particular ....

LITTLEJOHNS: So they're a team?

THOMAS: Exactly.

LITTLEJOHNS: I see. Dr. Thomas, you mentioned, I think, 16 countries. Could you give us some examples of successes and well, I suppose you might say, failures? I mean countries that are at the bottom of the heap and countries that are at the top of the heap?

THOMAS: Well, there are those countries that have experienced a very sharp decline in enrolment. Unfortunately, I think some of these countries are countries that are in crisis; countries that have gone through strife most recently ....

LITTLEJOHNS: Civil wars.

THOMAS: Civil wars, which I think one can understand. But there are countries

also that have not gone through these natural or human-made calamities that are also experiencing decline in enrolment. And one of the things that this programme is trying to do is to address some of those policy issues that account for this decline in enrolment. Issues relating for example to physical facilities – you know, school buildings, didactic materials for teaching, teacher salaries, teacher training. These are some of the things that this particular Initiative, as far as the cluster on education, is trying to address. And with the support of this trust fund available in the World Bank all of these issues are now being addressed in all these 16 countries and we are expecting that we will be able to in fact expand that support to countries that are even doing better in the near future.

LITTLEJOHNS: John, important as it is let's get away from education and ask Dr. Thomas another ...

METZLER: What about economic development going really beyond that? Don't the real political institutions in so many of African countries pull down the entire scenario as well? What I'm saying is a country may be blessed with splendid resources but yet a dictatorship or a kleptocracy will channel that in the wrong way, the state will fail, the state will implode and we're back to go. There are so many examples around the continent where countries, as I mentioned, blessed with resources have become amongst the poorest of the poor. How do you work on that? How do you resolve that?

THOMAS: Well, this is the reason why one of the four clusters that we are focussing on now is on governance. There has been a lot of controversy about this subject matter but I think one has to, for the record, understand the fact that I don't believe that African countries are against the whole concept of governance. In fact, when you look at the new agenda for the development of – the UN New Agenda for Development of Africa in the 1990's, you will see that governance featured among the priorities in that programme. This a programme that African governments have put together themselves. However, one of the concerns that people have is the adjective that is attached to the concept of good governance. Be that as it may ....

LITTLEJOHNS: It implies that their current governance is very bad.

THOMAS: People have been asking who defines this concept "good", or good governance. Many of the African countries are asking the question: "Don't we also have our own perspective on the whole issue of governance?" And I think the challenge facing us now is within this Initiative to see what we can do to help African governments come up with

what is the Africans' own perspective or perspectives on the issue of governance. Within the Initiative we are addressing challenges on accountability -- it's one of the issues you just mentioned -- transparency in governance, looking at legislative reforms, judiciary reforms, to try and see what can be done to make sure that the positive trend that we are seeing on the economic front right now in many of the countries can be sustained. To sustain that progress that many of the countries are making now we have to have stable government.

LITTLEJOHNS: This is **World Chronicle**. Our guest is Dr. A. Babatunde Thomas, Coordinator of the United Nations system-wide Special Initiative on Africa.

METZLER: Well, Doctor, we define many things and I think that's in the definition the devil is in the proverbial details. Having said that, most of us would agree that Somalia is a failed state. I noticed in our briefing papers also the concept of an over-burdened state which is to say one with a large bureaucracy, a creaky political system, economic system burdened by all kinds of socialist things that go bump in the night from years ago. Have you graduated from these isms, if you will, and brought in a different view on what would be called modern governance or where are we defining these terms, really?

THOMAS: Well, a number of African countries are now coming out of crisis and in order to avoid a fall back into those crisis situations there is a need to make sure that we address the bread and butter issues as people would say in this part of the world. We need to address the bread and butter issues because if you don't address the bread and butter issues there is going to be a relapse again. And this is the reason why one of the clusters of this Initiative is on the whole issue of poverty, the whole issue of job creation, the whole issue of youth employment, making sure that as we continue to do something on the political front to make sure that we don't have any more of these failed states and that those countries that are coming out of crisis can continue to make political progress we also must do something to make sure that on the economic front they continue to make progress. And I believe that what we are seeing now in terms of macro economic performance on the part of many of these countries is indeed very encouraging. The question is, can we help these countries to sustain that trend that we are seeing now.

HULE: We know that Africa generally lacks the resources at this moment to develop its own God-given resources. They don't have the finances to do that. And one of the goals of this Initiative is to help mobilize more resources for the development of Africa. How well has this Initiative done in raising resources for programmes that you are pursuing in

Africa?

THOMAS: We haven't done very well. I have to be very candid with you. We still have a long way to go. We are putting together a strategy for mobilizing resources to support concrete programmes on the ground for the various clusters that we have been talking about here. There was a misunderstanding in the beginning when people talk about resource mobilization. I think people thought we were talking about resource mobilization for UN agencies. No. We are talking about resource mobilization for programmes of countries. In other words, we are mobilizing resources for countries to support their development programmes and we now have in place a strategy to help us advance on that particular front. So far, the areas where we have made progress, we have made progress because we have the resources to address programmes in those areas. In health, we are very fortunate again to have the trust fund from the Norwegians which the World Bank and UNESCO in the case of education, as well as the World Bank and the World Health Organization have been able to mobilize to support activities in the health cluster. So we need the resources. There is no question at all about that. And we still have a long way to go. But what we are trying to do now is to encourage agencies that are the coordinating or the lead agencies for the various clusters to take the challenge of resource mobilization seriously themselves and we are beginning to see some positive signs in this direction.

LITTLEJOHNS: Dr. Thomas, President Clinton and some other leaders who have spoken about the digital divide, would you say that technology holds the answer to much of Africa's problems?

THOMAS: Well, yes indeed. I have a colleague of mine who always reminds me that what separates the rich from the poor is science and technology. So in that respect, yes. My response to your question is yes. On that particular front I think we are making some progress. The UN Economic Commission for Africa, which is the agency responsible for the cluster on information technology for development, has actually been making some remarkable progress. When this particular cluster started, when it was launched, the goal by the year 2000 was to have about half a dozen countries or so with connectivity in Africa. Today I think we can talk about no less than 26 countries with connectivity. So we are making progress. However, we need to do a lot more to try and encourage our governments also to give priority to science and technology.

LITTLEJOHNS: What about reaching out to the private sector, the technological

companies, the computer companies, etcetera? Microsoft with their huge amounts of money. Isn't there a scope for your Initiative to reach out to people like that?

THOMAS: Oh certainly, certainly. This Initiative is reaching out not only to work in partnership with our governments but to work in partnership with other stakeholders, working with private sector organizations. We have made approaches for example to the Turner Fund. We intend to do the same with Microsoft with the Gates Foundation. The challenges that face us in the continent is a challenge that no single entity can respond to satisfactorily. The challenges can only be responded to satisfactorily through partnerships. Partnership with the private sector, partnership with civil society, partnership with all of the key actors that are interested in seeing Africa progress – seeing Africa move from being a basket case to a bread basket.

METZLER: Well, partnership with the private sector seems to me the way to go. I have seen recently that in remote Timbuktu, in Mali, there is now the Internet, at least in the local post office. But how does one really square this circle when in fact phone lines are so pitifully few in sub-Saharan Africa ? One needs the phone line for the Internet so isn't it ...

LITTLEJOHNS: But you could use it by wireless.

METZLER: Well, Net TV and things like that but aren't you really, if you will, jumping ahead a couple of gears here or has technology passed me by on that as well?

THOMAS: Well in addition to terrestrial phone lines I think we also have satellite technology which is making it possible to actually reach the remotest part of the world today. There is wireless communication now in parts of Africa that many of us did not even dream of two, three years ago. So yes, I think in some respect we have seen some leapfrogging as far as use of technology is concerned but there's still a long way to go. I grant you that, yes the reach so far has been very limited but the opportunities are really boundless.

HULE: This Initiative Special I don't know what's so special about it because since it was launched really not much has not been heard about it, how it is even working. How much of Africa has been reached by this Initiative? How much of Africa? How many countries have you actually gone down to work with on the ground and let them see how this thing works?

THOMAS: Let me take that in two parts. What's special about the Initiative? What's special about the Initiative is that the Executive Heads of UN agencies made a commitment to hold themselves mutually accountable for getting results under this Initiative.

That is a major development. And when we talk about the Executive Heads we are talking about all of the funds and programmes and all of the specialized agencies of the United Nations as well as the Bretton Woods institutions -- the World Bank and the IMF. This is new. What is also new or special about this Initiative is that the coordination of the work of the various clusters is being done across the entire UN system by different agencies, not just one agency pretending to coordinate all the others. This is also new and it's special. And also the agencies themselves are working in such close partnership together that we are now beginning to see results on the ground. For example in education, apart from the 16 countries that have been identified as low enrolment countries, there is work also going on to try and help other countries that have requested assistance from the UN system. We are trying to make sure that whatever is done is demand-driven and the UN is not trying to impose on these countries. In the health cluster, 46 countries have participated in the various consultations that are going on and half of these are now involved in coming up with a health sector reform programme.

LITTLEJOHNS: Dr. Thomas, that's all the time we have. Thank you for being with us on this edition of **World Chronicle**.

Our guest has been Dr. A. Babatunde Thomas, Coordinator of the United Nations system-wide Special Initiative on Africa. He was interviewed by Jerome Hulé of the *News Agency of Nigeria* and John Metzler of *USA Radio Network*.

I'm Michael Littlejohns. Thank you for joining us. We invite you to be with us for the next edition of **World Chronicle.**

ANNOUNCER: Transcripts of the programme may be obtained free of charge by sending a stamped, self-addressed envelope to **World Chronicle**, United Nations, Room S-827L, New York, N.Y., 10017.

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